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ABSTRACT

Three institutions effected agreements enabling students in all of the institutions to enroll in the same course, a six-credit introductory psychology course. The three institutions--Athabasca University (AU), The Open Learning Institute (OLI), and North Island College (NIC)--were distance education institutions with open admissions policies which offered different delivery and tutorial support conditions. The most obvious differences were in the prescribed pacing of OLI students from enrollment through course completion and in the encouragement of regular face-to-face tutor/student interaction by NIC. A questionnaire collected information on reasons for enrolling and withdrawing, perceptions of course experiences, and educational motivation. Findings indicated OLI's pacing rule was clearly associated with the highest completion rate. The difference in tutorial support was not associated with differences in completion rates but was associated with differences in the time taken to reach halfway and end points in the course. (YLB)

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Student Completion Rates Under Three Different Pacing Conditions

Los Angeles, April 1981

Gail Crawford #12

A paper presented to the annual meeting of the AERA

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This paper describes some data obtained when three institutions effected agreements enabling students in all of the institutions to enrol in the same course.

The three institutions, Athabasca University (AU), The Open Learning Institute (OLI), and North Island College (NIC) are all distance education institutions with open admissions policies. They provide a variety of educational opportunities to students throughout Alberta and British Columbia. While they have these commonalities, they also differ in the ways in which they deliver their courses and provide tutorial support for their students.

The purpose of this paper is to describe some of the outcomes, in terms of completion rates, in one common course taken by students under three different delivery and tutorial support conditions.

Table 1 and 2 summarize the administrative delivery and support characteristics of each institution.

Table 1

Administrative Procedures*

	AU	NIC	OLI
Advising/Counselling	All students have access to central office counselling services on request.	All students have access to both central office and regional personnel	All students assigned to an advisor in central offices on admission
	Contacts are primarily phone and mail.	Contacts are face-to-face whenever possible.	Contacts are primarily phone and mail.
Admission/Enrollment	May be single step or two step process occurring by phone and mail.	Maybe single or two step process occurring primarily in person.	Single step process occurring by phone and mail.
Fees	$25 per credit ($150 per six credits)	$10 per credit ($60 per six credits)	$20 per semester hour ($120 per six credits)
	Materials and texts included in fee.	Materials and texts included in fee.	Additional charges for materials and books.
	$20 one-time only admission fee. Additional fees levied for additional time.		Additional fees for services, e.g. late registration, special exam, transcript evaluation
Student Evaluation/ Marking	Exams and assignments exchanged by mail	Exams and assignments exchanged in person and by mail	Exams and assignments exchanged by mail
	Evaluation scheduled by student.	Evaluation scheduled by student with tutor guidance	Evaluation scheduled by institution
Crediting	AU grants credit	Both AU and NIC grant credit	OLI grants credit

*These descriptions reflect conditions at the time this project was initiated (Fall, 1979). Subsequent changes have occurred in procedures at all three institutions. Further, these procedures are relevant only to the university-level course registrants in OLI and NIC.

Table 2

Delivery and Tutorial Systems

	AU	NIC	OLI
Delivery System			
Media	Primarily print based home-study packages	Primarily print-based home-study packages	Primarily print-based home-study packages
	Some use of other technologies emerging (e.g. T. V., radio, tele-conferencing, computers)	ditto	ditto
Pacing	Student paced within institution determined time guidelines. (12 months for 6-credit courses)	Student paced within institution determined time guidelines. (12 months for 6-credit courses)	Institution paced (Two four-month semesters for 6-credit courses)
	Up to six months additional time may be "purchased" by students.	Up to six months additional time may be "purchased" by students.	A few days additional time may be granted.
Tutorial System			
Personnel	Tutors are academic staff specialists in the course discipline, usually at the Master's or Ph.D. level	Tutors are academic staff who may or may not be specialists in the course discipline, usually at the M.A. or Ph.D. level.	Tutors are academic staff specialists in the course discipline, usually at the M. A. or Ph.D. level.
Role	Primarily academic role--marking, facilitating evaluating. Some administrative responsibilities.	Primarily academic role--marking, facilitating some evaluating. Some administrative responsibilities	Primarily academic role--marking, facilitating, evaluating. Some administrative responsibilities
Location	Most in urban areas	Most in urban areas	Most in urban areas
Contact	Contacts are primarily by phone and mail	Contacts are primarily in-person whenever possible. Phone and mail used if necessary.	Contacts are primarily by phone and mail.
Frequency	Contact frequency determined by tutor	Contact frequency weekly whenever possible	Contact frequency determined by tutor

Administratively, with reference to advising, admission, fees, evaluation and crediting, the institutions can be seen to have adopted similar procedures. AU and NIC share some procedures because of the duality of registration for NIC students. The most visible difference in these activities is the substantial effort made by NIC to ensure face-to-face contact between institutional personnel and students from initial advising through student evaluation. In addition, NIC students, as community college students, pay a substantially lower fee for the same course than do either AU or OLI students. It should also be noted that while students in all three institutions complete the evaluation activities prescribed by the course, AU and NIC students complete these activities when they wish while OLI students must complete them at the times scheduled by the institution.

The delivery and tutorial systems have major similarities. The most obvious differences among the three institutions are in the prescribed pacing of OLI students from enrolment through course completion and in the encouragement of regular face-to-face tutor/student interaction by NIC. There are exceptions to these general patterns at all three institutions but the course to be considered in this study essentially follows the patterns described.

The course selected for examination in this study is a 6 credit introductory Psychology course consisting of the following:

1. A textbook: Lindzey, G., C. Hall, and R. Thompson, Psychology, Worth Publishers, Inc., New York, 1978.

2. Four workbooks prepared by Athabasca University that contain objectives, overviews, summaries, and practice activities with feedback.

3. Two lab manuals prepared by Athabasca University and containing optional laboratory materials and directions.

4. Evaluation materials prepared by Athabasca University and consisting of practice essay, credit essay and lab selections, and examinations for each of the four workbooks.

The course materials were planned for home-study with telephone tutorial support and required the student to complete designated reading assignments, practice activities, credit exercises or labs, and examination for each of the 4 (1 1/2 credit) units.

Sample Population

The sample population consisted of 313 students enroling in introductory Psychology at the three institutions between September 1979 and February 1980. One hundred and eight of the students were from OLI's fall and winter (1979-80) group, 102 were from AU's registrants, and 103 were from VIC's registrants. For the OLI sample, this cohort represents the enrolments before registration was closed, for AU and VIC the cohorts represent students enroling between September 1979 and February 1980 excluding students enroling in concurrent experimental projects.

Procedures

Between May and September 1980, questionnaires were sent to all 313 students. The questionnaires asked for basic demographic information, previous educational experience, reasons for enroling, reasons for withdrawing, and perceptions of course experiences. A scale to measure educational motivation was also included.

The questionnaires were sent from AU with appropriate covering letters signed by individuals from the relevant institution. Three to four weeks after the questionnaire was sent, non-respondents were sent follow-up letters and questionnaires. Failure to return the second questionnaire

was followed by a phone call to the student from their tutors.

Questionnaires were received from 107 (34%) students, 53 from OLI students (50%), 34 from AU students (31.5%) and 20 from VIC students (18.5%).

Results

Questionnaire Data

Most data were obtained from student questionnaire returns, some additional supportive data was available from the student records systems. While many questions were asked, few showed differences among the groups of greater than or equal to 10 percent, therefore, only those items showing differences of greater than or equal to 10% are presented.

Table 3

Demographic and Questionnaire Data

		OLI (N=55) (%)	AU (N=34) (%)	NIC (N=20) (%)
1. Basic Education				
High School Diploma or Matriculation		91	82	75
2. Some College or College Diploma		37	79	55
3. Marital Status	Married	70	54	28
	Single	11	32	34
	Other	19	14	38

From table 3 some differences in basic education, post-secondary education, and marital status can be seen. While 91 percent of OLI students and 82 percent of AU students say they have high school diplomas or high school matriculation, only 75 percent of NIC students have these credentials. A further check of this information in the records system indicates that fewer NIC students than OLI and AU students are high school graduates. On the other hand, table 3 also presents the proportions of students who have some college experience or college diplomas. The records system also indicates that more NIC students than OLI students have previous college level experience. Finally, table 3 shows

differences in marital status across the three institutions with substantially more OLI students being married than either AU or NIC students and substantially more NIC students indicating "other" status than is seen in OLI and AJ students.

Table 4 presents student status data for all 313 students. Definitions of each category may assist in interpreting these data.

Definitions of Student Status Categories

Complete

OLI: Students attempting five or more of the 10 evaluation events and receiving a final grade.

AU/NIC: Students completing credit evaluation for all four credit blocks

(Note: using these definitions, students failing to earn passing grades are counted as completions)

Withdrawn

a. Students who request to be withdrawn at any time

b. Students who complete no more than four evaluation activities and allow their enrolment to lapse.

Active (AU and NIC only)

a. Extensions - students who have extended their 12 month enrolment period by payment of a small fee.

b. Suspensions - students who have extended their enrolment period by negotiating "time out" periods

Table 4

Completion Status of Students in Three Institutions

	OLI (N = 138) %	AU (N = 102) %	NIC (N = 103) %
Complete	58	26	25
Withdrawn	42	48	42
Active	-	27	33

Student completion status data were drawn from the records after all AU and NIC students had been enrolled for at least 12 months. Table 4 shows a substantial difference in completion rates across the three institutions. It should be noted that these completion rates of 58, 26 and 25 percent are calculated in the most stringent way possible (cf Orton, 1977) so that all entering students are accounted for.

While a few more of these students will probably complete the course in the next few months, previous experience suggests that no more than 8-10 of these "active" students will finish the course. Thus the completion rates for AU and NIC students is not likely to increase by more than 5-10 percent.

Figure 1

TIME TAKEN TO COMPLETION BY STUDENTS IN THREE INSTITUTIONS

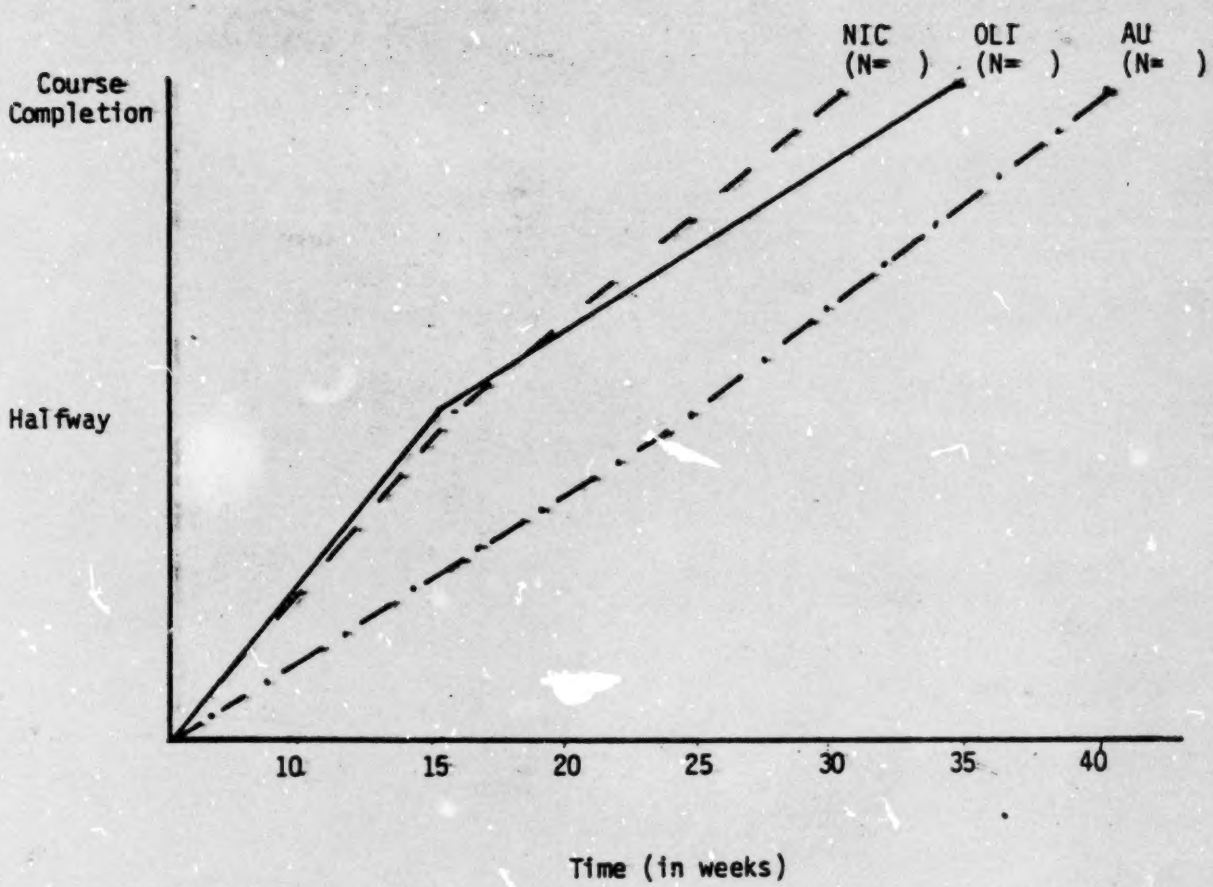

Figure 1 visualizes the relative rates of progress in the three institutions. The OLI students reached the halfway and end points of the course in 15 and 34 weeks respectively. These students were required by their institution to maintain this pace.

The AU and VIC students had no institutionally prescribed times to reach the halfway and end points of the course, however, VIC students, on average, reached these points in 16 and 30 weeks. AU students, on average, took 24 and 40 weeks to reach the halfway and end points of the course.

Discussion

The measure of student success used in this study is completion rate. It is important to note that the particular formula used to calculate the rates is a very stringent one which includes all enroling students. A less stringent and more commonly used formula would omit students withdrawing early in the course from the calculations. Such a formula would increase the completion rates at all three institutions by approximately 10%.

It is also important to note that completion rate is a somewhat narrowly prescribed measure of student success. In this study, student grades could not be used because of differences among the institutions in marking and recording

of grades. Other indices of student success such as general satisfaction and reenrolment in other courses were not available at this time.

The completion rate measure, while a narrow estimation of relative success, was clearly able to distinguish among the groups. Since this research is descriptive rather than experimental and no opportunity existed to control for potentially relevant variables, it is important that any attempt to explain the results be viewed as speculative until more controlled research is conducted.

An attempt was made to determine whether the student populations differed. While some differences were found, limitations in questionnaire responses make any conclusions about the students tentative. The data, however, provide no strong evidence to support the hypothesis that these students differ from each other in systematic or relevant ways. Thus, in this study, differences in completion rate cannot be accounted for by differences in student populations.

The course was the same for all students. Indeed, this was the only element over which some control was possible. Thus, differences in the course cannot be viewed as a plausible explanation for differences in completion rates.

Pacing rules are one of the elements which did differ substantially across institutions. One institution (OLI) used a closely structured semester-based pacing rule in which students were required to submit assignments or write exams approximately every three weeks throughout the two semesters of enrolment. The other two institutions (AU and NIC) used a very loosely structured pacing rule in which students were required to submit assignments within each part of the course and to complete all credit activities within a broadly defined time frame. The institution paced rule is clearly associated with the highest completion rate. This association is not entirely surprising. Some evidence exists, in the form of institutional reports and personal communications, that does suggest institutional pacing is associated with 60-80% completion rates (e.g., British Open University, Australia's University of New England and University of Queensland, New Zealand's Massey University). Similar evidence exists that student pacing in distance education institutions is associated with completion rates of less than 50% (e.g., Canada's Athabasca University and North Island College, Australia's Deakin University, and Mexico's National University (Extension).)

Tutorial support in the three institutions is also different. Both AU and the OLI rely primarily upon telephone and mail contact which appears to occur monthly or

less frequently while NIC provides regular weekly face-to-face contacts for the majority of their students. This difference was not associated with differences in completion rates but was associated with differences in the time taken to reach halfway and end points in the course.

Of the four elements: students, course, pacing rules and tutorial support, only the latter two appear to be plausible explanations for the student completion rate differences obtained in this study. Student differences cannot be totally excluded but seem less plausible explanations for these results.

This research activity was conducted to capitalize upon a fortuitous arrangement among the three institutions. It was recognized at the outset that the absence of controls would impair generalizability, its primary purpose was exploratory. It is hoped that the data obtained and the differences found will now support additional research using more students, other courses and more controlled data collection strategies such that we will be able to address the problems with more precision.

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